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Two Death Customs in Ireland

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DUBLIN

121 In this article, I wish to draw the attention of students of the cult of the dead to two customs associated with it which have been observed for many generations in the southwest of Ireland. So far as I know, neither of them has hitherto been described in detail in any scientific journal or other work.

1. Funeral Boundaries

764 The importance of *an teampoll dúchais*, the traditional family burial-ground, is shown by the many customs and superstitions relating to it which are still fairly common in rural communities in Ireland. How often have we heard or read of a strange funeral seen at night, which was composed of deceased relatives of some recently dead person who had died and had been buried far from his family graveyard; the dead concourse was taking the body home (often even across the Atlantic) to find rest with his deceased kith and kin? Or, of a decapitated or maimed corpse which had been buried in the proper graveyard; the missing head or other member, however, was carefully carried by a "dead funeral" at night and laid in the same grave as the body? Thus, every effort within reason was made to bury the dead in the family burial-ground. This might have been due either to (a) respect for the dead, (b) fear of evil results, if the duty was ignored, (c) the wish of the dying person to be buried with his ancestors, or (d) any of a long list of other reasons which might be adduced. Even within a far-flung parish, the distance which the corpse had to be carried might amount to twenty miles. The distance would naturally be greater when the person had died in a remote district or county. Thus, funerals often took days in such cases, and halts had to be made overnight. The hardship endured by the coffin-bearers, who in olden times [482] almost always carried the coffin on their shoulders, may well be imagined.

In Ireland, as in most European countries, in the days when coffins were borne on men's shoulders, and even still in certain parts of Ireland, certain resting-places for funerals were traditionally appointed along the route. These were often at crossroads, at ancient market-crosses, which may have been associated with boundaries, or at boundaries between lands, parishes, or counties. In olden times, the corpse was not allowed to touch the earth at these resting-places; the toes of the

boots of the bearers or else the type of barrow (of wood or straw) on which the coffin was borne, served to prevent the coffin from touching the soil. Again, in Ireland (at least, in parts of County Wexford), as in some European countries, wooden crosses or other memorials were left behind at such halts; in the Kilmore area of South Wexford, two crosses are carried with each funeral—one is left at the roadside at a halting-place, the other is set up on the grave. Cairns were often associated with funeral resting-places. It was customary in certain European countries for the bearers to partake of food and drink at resting-points; this, I am told, was the practice also in parts of Donegal and Waterford. Having rested for a while, fresh bearers took up the coffin, and the graveyard was ultimately reached.

I have already referred to the practice of laying down the coffin when a boundary-line was reached. My father, who died six years ago, at the age of 86, told me about a funeral-boundary custom in my native parish of Tuosist, in County Kerry, in the extreme southwest corner of Ireland. He was born in 1863 in the townland of Clogherane in Kerry, only a mile distant from the County Cork border. The high range of the Caha Mountains runs for over thirty miles through the peninsula of Béara, and separates at this point the Kerry parish of Tuosist from the Cork parish of Clanlawrence. During the Famine period of 1845–50 the men who lived at either side of the pass, Bealach Scairte, which led from one county (and parish) to the other, were employed, by way of a relief-scheme, in building a road across the pass. When the work ceased, the middle portion—about two miles in length—still remained undone. And so it remained until about twenty-five years ago, when, by the aid of State funds, the road now known as The Healy Pass was built across the mountain and the two ends were joined up. I often crossed by the old path from Kerry to Cork myself, before the new road was built; it was not so difficult in the early stage of the journey, but when the narrow defile (An Céim Cumhang) at the border was reached, one had to clamber as best one could over and between huge boulders which had fallen into the defile, some of them weighing forty or fifty tons, at a rough estimate.

Any funeral which now has occasion to pass from Cork to Kerry (or *vice versa*), can do so with the luxury of a hearse and motor-cars. But it was different when my father was a boy, and for long generations before that. He told me that one day, when he was on his way to the school at Glenmore—it was in the 1870's—he saw a large concourse of men, both young and old, passing along the old road at the foot of the mountain and through the fields. They were all carrying weapons or implements of some kind—some had hay-forks, he said, others had scythes, others hatchets, still others heavy sticks. He asked later on where they were going, and was told that they were going to meet a funeral, which was coming into Kerry from Cork, at the boundary-line. He told me that he knew well the Kerryman, who was leader of the large group; I knew him too, as he lived to a great age, and could speak no English. His name was Conchobhar Uaithne Ó Súilleabháin, and he lived at Shinnagh in the parish of Tuosist. My father told me that he heard later from some of those that were present at the boundary-line, that when the Corkmen appeared at the border, carrying the corpse tortuously on their shoulders, Conchobhar stepped in front of the bearers and stood with his stick raised on the large flat stone which marked the border at this point. The stone, by the way, is still known as Leac na gCorp (The Stone of the Corpses), and it is in the middle of the hollow which, avoiding the defile, was used by funerals, or by cattle

764 578 and sheep and horses being driven across to fairs at either side. The hollow is still named Eisc na gCorp (The Hollow of the Corpses), but travellers over the new road, which by-passed the hollow, cannot see it except they are told about it and search for it. To get back to my father's story: the Kerrymen, a hundred or more strong, had lined the boundary-line with their weapons ready for action and, as the Corkmen approached the flat stone, the Kerry leader ordered them to lay down the coffin on it.

"*Leagaidh síos annsan anois í! Ná téighidh a thuille!*"[1] he ordered, indicating the stone with his stick.

The Corkmen obeyed the order, and the Kerrymen then took the coffin on their shoulders and bore it down the mountainside into their own territory and along the six miles of road to the graveyard at Kilmackillogue. No fighting took place at the border-line on that day. But it was not always so on previous occasions. I heard the old people of the parish say that fights took place in former years when funerals crossed the boundary at Leac na gCorp, and that some of those engaged had been killed.

I know of three other boundary-lines where similar precautions were taken against those who carried the coffin to the border-line forcing their way across, while still carrying the remains. The first was at Glaise'n Fhineáin, a stream some miles to the west of Leac na gCorp, in the Béara peninsula, whose waters separate the counties of Cork and Kerry. The second was at Barrlinn, an old mountain road between counties Cork and Kerry, which ran southwards from Kilgarvan in the latter county to Bantry in the former; a cairn lies just beside the boundary-line where funerals halted and bearers were exchanged; fights are said to have taken place here in former times when funerals crossed the border. These two boundary-lines, as well as that described in more detail at Leac na gCorp, are all fairly close together, and all three are at the dividing-lines of parishes as well as counties. I have been told of still another boundary-line where fights took place on funeral days. This is the mountain pass known as Mullach Bhéal in the Dingle peninsula in Kerry, over which funerals passed in former times (before the Connor Hill road was built). These funerals were either on their way westwards from the parish of Clochán to some graveyard in the parishes to the west, or *vice versa*. Old people in that area tell of coffins even having been broken at this point during the attempt to force the boundary-line, and a large cairn marks the spot. Even when this old route was by-passed by the building of the Connor Hill road, and funerals followed the new route, the men from either side who assembled at the boundary insisted that the coffin be handed over to them at that point, and they carried it into their own parish. [493] When carts replaced shoulder-bearers at a later date, the coffin had to be transferred from the cart which had carried it to the border to one from the other parish.

The reason given in more recent times for the insistence on the change of bearers being made at the border was that the men of the second parish (to which the funeral was going) did not wish it to be said by the men of the first parish that their assistance was needed to carry the coffin further; they were strong enough to bear the coffin into and through their own parish without any help from outsiders. This reason is hardly the main one, however, and is likely to have been put forward only when the original reason had been forgotten.

[1] "Lay it down there now! Don't go any further!"

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In Tuosist the reason given to me by my father and some other old people was that ill-luck would fall upon Kerry and especially on the parish of Tuosist, if the Corkmen succeeded in forcing the coffin across Leac na gCorp and laid it down on Kerry soil. Sickness, bad crops, and misfortunes of many kinds would follow the corpse, if it were laid beyond the boundary-stone. This is undoubtedly the original reason for the defence of the border on funeral days. A corpse has in many lands for long been regarded as having evil magical power (known scientifically as *orenda* or *mana*) of an impersonal kind latent in itself. In Ireland, for example, fishermen regarded it as unlucky to take the corpse of a drowned person into a boat. Also, *an féar gorta* ("the hungry grass"), which grew wherever a corpse touched the earth, had the power of causing all those who walked over the spot to be stricken with abnormal hunger. Many other instances of the evil power of a corpse might be cited. Just two hundred years ago, Morty Óg O'Sullivan, a native chieftain of Béara in West Cork, who had fought against the British both in Ireland and in many European countries as a member of the "Wild Geese", was slain outside his own house near Eyeries in Béara. The British took his body to a warship at Bere Island and dragged it through the sea in the wake of the ship about sixty miles to Cork. A poet who described this happening wrote the couplet:

Ní raibh aon rath ar an uisce ó Chorcaigh go Béara
Ó tairngeadh tríd an bradán gléigeal.[1]

No fish were said to have since been caught in the sea-route through which the corpse was dragged.

In Sweden, Miss Louise Hagberg tells us, if a corpse were carried over cultivated ground or over lakes, they became thereby unfruitful, and crop-growing fields lost their vegetation. She also says that during the Middle Ages those persons over whose lands a corpse was carried unlawfully had the right to compensation; in Västergötland anybody who carried a corpse across the land of another, without the permission of the owner, rendered himself liable to a prescribed fine.

Thus, the funeral-boundary customs in the Cork-Kerry area, which have died out only in comparatively recent times, seem to fit into the wider pattern of custom and superstition devised to give protection against the magical evil power associated with corpses.

2. Wearing Clothes for the Dead

In the year 1918 or so, an uncle of mine died in the townland of Fehanagh, in the parish of Tuosist, in southwest Kerry. This is my native parish. Jerry Sullivan was my uncle's name; he died at the age of sixty-four. I was fifteen years old at the time, and was spending some weeks of my summer holidays at my uncle's when he became ill and died. I was allowed to remain in the house during the illness, wake, and funeral.

It is still the immemorial custom in that parish to get a suit of clothes specially made by a local tailor when a person dies. The suit is not worn by the corpse in the coffin. Still, it is intended

[1] There has been no luck on the water from Cork to Béara
Since the gleaming salmon was dragged through it.

764 294 292 specifically for the dead person; I will describe in a moment the use to which it is put. Even though the dead person had a new suit of clothes at the time of his death, which he had never worn, but which he had ordered and got made for himself, this suit will not serve the purpose I mention, after his death. Still another new suit must be ordered immediately the person dies, and must be ready for wear on the Sunday following his death. There are certain rules which are *de rigeur* as far as the suit is concerned: (a) it must not be made to measure—the tailor would know most of the people of the parish and would have made clothes for many of them from time to time; when, therefore, a suit is ordered by the relatives of the man who has died, the tailor knows fairly well what the measurements of the deceased were, and makes the suit accordingly; (b) the material used in making the suit must be of good quality—otherwise the dead man will not be properly clad in the next world; (c) the suit must be complete in every detail; (d) it must not be tried on to see if it fits. Stories about events which followed a disregard for these rules will be referred to later.

764 292 When the clothes for my deceased uncle reached the house from the tailor on the Saturday evening after the burial, an interesting ritual was carried out, according to local custom. I remember the evening quite well; it was a very fine summer, and the mountains all around the valley were bathed by the rays of the setting sun. A neighbouring woman, named Mrs. Healy, who lived next door, came to the house of my late uncle at dusk, and asked his wife, children, and myself, to leave. We went some distance away from the house into a field. I heard afterwards from my aunt and from her children that Mrs. Healy then carried out the following rites: She was alone in the house, as I have said, and she first laid out the clothes, garment by garment, on the back of a kitchen chair, which was in the middle of the floor; the underclothes were on top of the pile of clothes, then came the shirt, then the trousers, then the waistcoat, then the coat, then the socks and shoes, and finally the hat and walking-stick underneath. Having thus arranged them, she then called on my deceased uncle three times by name, using the following words: "Here are your clothes, Jerry Sullivan! Come for them, and may you wear them in the next world as they will be worn for you in this!" She then sat down by the fire for short time. She then arose, took the chair and the garments to the threshold of the kitchen, leading to the yard, and repeated the same call and words three times. Having sat at the fireside again for a while, she took the chair and clothes out into the yard, again called three times on the dead man, and returned to the house alone, closing the door behind her. Having allowed some little time to elapse, she went out into the yard, brought the chair and clothes into the kitchen, and put them as they were, in the room at the bottom of the kitchen until next morning.

When she had finished her task, which occupied about a half-hour, as far as I can remember, she called us back to the house, and we all had our evening meal, as if nothing unusual had happened.

Early next morning, at the dawn of day, before anyone else in the house was up, my cousin, the dead man's son, arose, and Mrs. Healy again arrived to complete her task. My cousin went out through the kitchen door, turned round, and knelt on the threshold. Mrs. Healy then placed the suit, still arranged on the chair, inside the open door. My cousin then asked her for each garment in turn, in the name of the dead person, and she handed them to him as he asked for them.

He later put on the suit for Mass, and wore it at the Divine Service and afterwards, until he returned home. Although there was a disparity of over thirty years in the ages of my cousin and that of his father, the resemblance caused by the unusual dress was striking. 764 292

This custom of wearing clothes for the dead is still quite strong in Tuosist. It is also practised either fully, or in varying degrees of decadence, in some of the surrounding parishes, as well as in the south-western part of the adjoining county of Cork. In the Dingle peninsula, further north, in West Kerry, the custom now is to bring a suit of clothes for the dead person in a parcel to Mass on the three prescribed Sundays. A suit of clothes which had already belonged to the deceased suffices for the fulfilment of the practice in some districts in the southwest of Ireland, where, as far as can be judged by the vigour of its survival, the custom had its stronghold. It is difficult to say whether the accounts of the wearing of clothes for the dead in Counties Cavan and Wexford, which I have been given, point to a country-wide distribution in olden times or to the practice having taken hold in these two widely separated counties through some other cause.

The elaborate ceremony carried out by Mrs. Healy after the death of my uncle, which I have described above, was confined to the first Saturday evening and Sunday morning. My cousin took off the suit on his return from Mass on that day, and wore it at Mass again on the two succeeding Sundays, without any preliminary ceremony. Even when a neighbour wears the clothes instead of some member of the household, he must return them to the house on each of the first two Sundays; he may retain them altogether after the third Sunday, if the immediate relatives so arrange. Otherwise they are given to some poor person to wear in the normal way. A neighbour is called upon to wear the clothes only when there is no relative of the deceased who can fulfil the custom, e.g., when the sons of the dead man have emigrated or are too young for the purpose. [602] [621]

Almost everybody in the parish of Tuosist, where, as I have said, the practice of wearing clothes for the dead at Mass on three consecutive Sundays after the interment is still faithfully carried out, is a Catholic, and a large congregation attends Mass every Sunday. After Mass, it is customary for the people to spend some time chatting near the church when Mass is over. They all notice that a certain young man from the parish, as the case may be, is dressed like an old man on three particular Sundays, but, knowing well that he is fulfilling the age-old custom referred to, they pass no comment on it. While the custom of wearing the clothes for adults is still strong in the parish, the Saturday evening and Sunday morning rituals have, however, now died out.

It is evident from the words used by Mrs. Healy in the Saturday evening ritual ("may you wear them in the next world as they will be worn for you in this") that the traditional and original intention of the making of a special suit of clothes in this manner was to provide the dead person with raiment in the afterworld. That the dead were believed to have some kind of continuing existence after passing from this life is also indicated by, among other things, the variety of goods which were buried in coffins with the dead: in Ireland, we have references to such things as food, pipes, tobacco, defensive weapons, tools or implements, watches and other jewellery, as well as money, being placed in coffins in former times. The practice was well-known in other countries also. Prior to the introduction of the special cerements for the bodies of the dead, which have come to be known in Catholic lands as habits, it was customary to fit out the dead for burial in their best clothes. Young unmarried girls were often dressed as brides in Northern Europe, 764 775 292

764 perhaps to indicate that they had become the spouses of Death itself. It is probable, therefore, that
775 the Irish practice of providing, as well as the habit, a normal type of new suit for the dead, is but
292 an extension of the burial of clothes with the corpse itself. The fact that it is pagan in its origin, yet is still carried out by devout Catholics in a parish like Tuosist, who wear the clothes for the dead at Mass on three Sundays after the death has taken place, shows both the tenacity of pre-Christian ideas concerning the afterworld and the easy way in which Pagan ideas and practices were in this, as in many other cases, clothed over with Christian raiment. Indeed, it is possible that the Church itself, may have been instrumental in getting the Catholics under their care to wear the clothes to Mass for a certain number of Sundays with the intention of reminding the congregation of the person who had died and of getting them to pray for his soul.

764 Stories about the displeasure and even the sufferings of the dead whenever the custom of wear-
292 ing special clothes for them was not properly carried out are legion in the areas where the practice was known. I have already mentioned some of the traditional rules which had to be observed in the making and the wearing of the suit. Disregard of any or all of these was believed to give offence to the dead, and the reaction of the deceased to such indifference or carelessness on the part of the living relatives forms the basis of most of the stories. A few examples will illustrate their trend.

764 A man whom I knew well died in Tuosist about thirty years ago. A cousin of his was asked to
787 wear the clothes for the dead man on the three Sundays after his burial, and he agreed to do so.
292 During the week after the first Sunday (on which day the suit was first worn to Mass), a friend of mine, a shoemaker in the district, told me that he had a very vivid dream. He dreamt that he was making his way home along a lonely by-road late at night, and at a certain place, where the dead man had often stacked turf, he saw the dead man sitting with his back to the fence at the roadside. The moon shone down on his face and the shoemaker had no difficulty in recognising him in the dream. Plucking up courage, he saluted the dead man.

"Good night, Dan," said the shoemaker.

"Good night, Tim," was the reply.

"How are you?" asked the shoemaker, knowing that he was dead.

"I'm all right, except for one thing," said the dead man. "They gave me a fine suit and a fine shirt and a fine hat"—and he indicated each garment in turn—"but look at the boots they gave me!" And he pointed at the tattered boots on his feet.

"I'll attend to that, Dan," said the shoemaker, and he bade the other good night and made his way home, very much frightened.

Next morning he awoke with vivid recollections of the strange dream he had had during the night. It was Sunday morning, so he knew that the dead man's cousin would be wearing the clothes for the deceased at Mass for the second time that day. The church was four miles from his home, and having walked the mountainous road to Mass, he joined the congregation at the cross-roads afterwards. Without saying anything to anybody concerning his dream, he kept on the look-out for the dead man's cousin, and when he saw him, the shoemaker went over to join the group of men who were chatting with him. The shoemaker quietly concentrated his attention on the boots which the cousin was wearing, and it did not take long to establish that they

were not new, but had, in fact, been made by the shoemaker himself for the dead man, who had worn them only once before his death. The dead man's wife had apparently thought that it was not necessary to order a new pair of boots to be made. The shoemaker had, however, promised the dead man to have the matter set right, so he quietly sent a message to the dead man's wife next day about his dream. She immediately ordered a new pair of shoes to be procured, and these were worn at Mass, along with the rest of the outfit, until the traditional rule had been fully observed.

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A friend of mine in the parish of Clanlawrence in County Cork told me the following story to illustrate how carefully the details of the practice must be observed. A woman in that parish had a son who died. She got a new suit made for him, to be worn at Mass on the three Sundays after his burial, and on the Saturday evening prior to the first Sunday she laid the suit (as Mrs. Healy had done when my uncle had died) on the back of a chair in the kitchen, sprinkled it with holy water, and called on the dead son to come for them. Having next placed them at the threshold of the kitchen, she finally left them for a short while in the yard, and sat by the fire for a moment, presumably to allow the dead son to come for the suit. Suddenly she heard something being thrown against the door and, on investigating, she found that it was the new waistcoat. She then remembered that she had deliberately refrained from putting her dead son's watch in the pocket, intending to keep it as a memento. Needless to say, she immediately put the watch in the waistcoat pocket and replaced the garment on the chair in the yard. There was no further disturbance.[1]

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[1] For general references to the custom mentioned in 1, see: När Döden Gästar, Louise Hagberg, Stockholm, 1937, pp. 331–379. Also, Über Krankheit, Tod und Jenseitsvorstellungen in Irland, Hans Hartmann, Halle, 1942, pp. 11–115; and Der Totenkult in Irland, by the same author, Heidelberg, 1952, pp. 15–17, 183.

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